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SEX COMPOSITION OF CHILDREN,
SEX PREFERENCE FOR THE NEXT CHILD AND
SUBSEQUENT FERTILITY DESIRE AND EXPECTATION

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CHAPTER I

PURPOSE AND ORGANIZATION

1) Introduction

In 1975, the Health Department's Management Services and Research Unit (MSRU) carried out a fertility survey in the Hutt Valley area of the Greater Wellington Region. It was followed by the publication of the "Family Growth Study" (FGS) which, according to the authors, is a preliminary report on contraceptive knowledge and practice, pregnancy planning, family size ideal and expectation, and other aspects of fertility behaviour. In the last section of the report, the authors, Reinken and Blakey (1976), pointed out the need for further analysis of the data. One matter of interest is the relationship between preference for sex balance and expectations for additional children. In their words: "Preferences for sex balance in family formation were recorded and correlation of these with comments on expectation for further children and expressions of opinion on ideal family size would be of interest" (Reinken and Blakey, 1976: 50).

The relationship between the existing sex composition of the family and the future desire and expectation to have additional children has been chosen as the topic of the present study in response to this recommendation. In general, this study investigates the effect of sex preference on fertility. Given a current trend toward smaller family sizes, the issue that needs more immediate attention, is which factor would exert more influence on fertility, sex preference or the norm of smaller family size. Although this study concentrates on more specific questions, to be later outlined, its findings will hopefully make a contribution to the understanding of this general issue.

The major questions that this study attempts to answer are:

(a) Do married women in New Zealand have any sex preference; (b) If they do, would it be a preference for a specific sex, or for a gender balance, or a combination of both; (c) Would the sex preference be strong enough to affect subsequent fertility intentions and (d) How important is the sex preference, in comparison to socioeconomic and other socio-demographic factors, in affecting the subsequent fertility intentions?

2) Purpose of the Study

Using the data available from the Hutt Valley survey, this study aims to answer the previously outlined questions. From the total respondents of 863 married women between 20-45 years of age, only those of European stock, who had from one to four children and were contracepting at the time of the survey, were chosen. Sex preference and its effects on fertility were inferred from the analyses of the relationship between sex composition of the living children of the eligible respondents and their desire and expectation to have at least another child at some time.⁽¹⁾

The analysis was carried out in two steps. The first examines the relationship between sex composition and the sex preference for the next child among those who wanted, as well as expected, another child. Hopefully, this answers the first three questions of whether sex preference exists, its characteristics, and its relation to subsequent fertility intentions. The second step examines those factors that account for differential desire and expectation regarding subsequent fertility among those of the same parity. Of major interest are the sex composition of the children and those socio-economic factors such as the mother's education, ideal and expected family size, her own and the husband's income and occupation. It is hoped that as a consequence of the second step, those characteristics will be identified that make some respondents at given parities more likely than others to continue their reproduction.

Although the problem area is sex preference and subsequent fertility, the study includes not only the relationship between sex composition and future desire and expectation, but also tries to probe further for other factors that might directly or indirectly affect subsequent fertility. Despite this apparently wide scope, it must be emphasised that, first and foremost, attention is given to the relationship between sex preference, sex composition and the inclination to have another child.

(1) The question about sex preference for the next child was further asked only when respondents stated they wanted and expected another child.

3) Theory and Hypotheses

In the more developed parts of the world, it is a common observation that children are generally valued for psychological reasons, and that most couples want children of each sex. Exactly what mechanisms account for these patterns are not known. Presumably, they are due to the declining economic significance of children as well as the differential satisfactions derived from raising a girl as opposed to a boy or vice versa (Freedman, Freedman and Whelpton, 1960; Williamson, 1978). This might give rise to the attitude that sons and daughters are equally valuable, but in different ways. The above reasoning leads to the belief that there exists a preference for a balanced sex composition of the children. Due to the long history of son preference, one needs to add that this preference for gender balance might be characterised by a desire to have a more or less equal number of children of each sex, with some partiality for the odd numbered one to be a son. In short, it is assumed that there exists some preference for sons as well as for a more or less balanced sex composition of children.

The preference for gender balance can affect subsequent fertility, and hence, completed family size as well, if the actual sex composition is out of balance. This statement is viable only under the assumptions that the preference is stronger than the desire to strictly adhere to the family size ideal⁽²⁾ and that there are no constraints that would stop a couple from having another child if they so intend. Other things held constant, those with children all of the same sex will be more likely than their balanced counterparts of the same parity to desire and expect at least another child. This relationship between sex composition and the contingency to have additional children should be characterised by a U-shaped curve, at each end of which are those who have either all boys or all girls.

Sex preference is by no means the only factor affecting the decision to have another child. Various other variables enter the

(2) A number of findings indicate, however, that there is a tendency to rationalize actual family sizes by stating that they are ideal. Family size ideal is thus not a very reliable analytical concept (Clare and Kiser, 1951; Reinken and Blakey, 1976).

picture in the decision process; some may be consciously thought about, others might be part of a couple's make-up which influences their way of thinking. The family size ideal, the mother's age, her employment status, their financial situation, are some major factors that must be weighed against the desire to attain the ideal number of daughters and sons. Superimposed on the couple's reasoning process are such previous and present experiences as their education backgrounds and their subsequent occupational status. Both are believed to be the most important underlying factors accounting for the couple's socio-economic standing, their motivations, tastes and behaviours. As family size ideal and sex preference are an aspect of taste, there is every reason to suspect that they are as much shaped by the couple's education and occupation as their economic status.

Besides giving the qualifications to work in a higher occupational class, it is commonly observed that the modernizing effect of education results in more liberal outlooks and tastes (Fawcett, 1970). If this really is the case, it should follow that the more highly educated wives are likely, not only to be working and in better-paid jobs, but also to have less sex preference. The probability of them having another child should consequently be lower, compared to those at the same parity who do not work and those with less well-paid jobs. This might be explained in terms of the supposed incompatibility of the work role and the maternal role in an urban environment, and also by the higher opportunity cost involved.

In summary, it is here argued that there exists a preference for a more or less balanced sex composition of children, with some bias for sons. At the same parity, this preference is more likely to affect the desire and expectation to have another child among couples whose children's sex ratio is high on the female side. The desire to continue reproduction, however, has to be weighed against various situational factors. They, in turn, are directly and indirectly affected by two underlying variables; education and occupation.

Hypothesis

In the light of the above arguments, this study attempts to test the following hypotheses:

1) Preference for sex balance is one of the factors influencing the desire and expectation to have another child. The sub-hypotheses are:

- (a) At given parities, and among those who want and expect another child, those whose children are all of one sex would prefer the next one to be the opposite sex. In addition, among those who have an equal number of boy(s) and girl(s), there is a tendency to prefer another boy than another girl.
- (b) At given parities, those with children all of the same sex are more likely than those with both sons and daughters to want and expect more children; the all-girl family is more likely to want and expect another child than the all-boy family.

2) The desire and expectation regarding subsequent fertility is also affected by ideal and actual family size. It is expected that:

- (a) At given parities, those with higher ideal family size are more likely to want and expect another child.
- (b) The lower the parity, the more likely the desire and expectation.

3) At given parities, the higher the mother's education, the less likely they will want and expect another child.

4) At given parities, working mothers are less likely to want and expect any more children. The ones in a higher occupational class are less likely than those in a lower occupational class to do so.

5) At the same parity, husband's income and occupation are likely to be negatively associated with subsequent fertility intentions.

4) Limitations of the Study

In relation to this study, the data are less than optimal in two respects. First the data were collected for purposes other than those used in this study. Therefore, this one suffers from the usual constraints of the secondary analysis of pre-collected data. That is, it puts a limit to the quantity of variables used and to what can be done with them. The second constraint arises from the present study's requirement that the sample have some particular characteristics;

namely, being Europeans, with one to four children, and able to control their fertility. This has substantially reduced our sample size and, at times, makes it far from adequate for certain detailed computations, due to low cell frequencies. These factors all limit the depth to which this study can go.